

At least 4 historical sites in Syria devastated by looting, conflict

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USPA News - At least four major archaeological sites in Syria have been heavily looted and damaged, according to an analysis of high-resolution images that document the extent of the destruction after nearly four years of conflict, a U.S. scientific society reported on Thursday. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) used high-resolution satellite images to analyze six ancient Syrian sites with major historical and cultural significance.

The sites - Dura Europos, Ebla, Hama's Waterwheels, Mari, Raqqa, and Ugarit - have all been nominated as World Heritage Sites. The images revealed numerous pits throughout three sites where ancient cities once stood and provide evidence of looting due to the distinct craters which are visible. "These images show the destruction of ancient artifacts, architecture, and most importantly, archaeological context that is the record of humanity's past," said Katharyn Hanson, a post-doctoral fellow at the Penn Cultural Heritage Center. "From the origins of civilization to the first international empires, Syria's cultural heritage and these sites in particular are vitally important to our understanding of history." The most extensive looting identified in the report was at Dura-Europos, which was founded in the 3rd century B.C. and served as a frontier city as well as the main hub for caravan routes. The site represents a blend of cultural traditions, including Greek, Mesopotamian, Aramaic, Persian, and Roman influences. There had been numerous reports of damage through social media, but the AAAS report now documents the extent of the damage. Based on the imagery analysis, 76 percent of the area within the city wall had been damaged by April, and the looting pits were so close together it was impossible to distinguish individual pits, the researchers report. Looting pits outside the city wall were less dense but still numerous; approximately 3,750 individual pits were observed. Images from April show four vehicles among the ancient Roman ruins in close proximity to the looting, suggesting that the disturbances at the site may have been ongoing at that time. The second site described in the report is Ebla, which was the site of an important kingdom in the Early Bronze Age. The site is best known for its archive of several thousand written tablets that revolutionized knowledge regarding the ancient history and political economy of the region, the report says. Ebla is constructed out of mud brick and is thus extremely vulnerable to erosion without preservation. The images in the analysis show looting pits, including 45 new holes observed between August 2013 and August of this year, as well as eroded walls, earthen berm fortifications, and heavy vehicle tracks. Military compounds have also been constructed at the site, presumably because the site is elevated over the surrounding plain and provides a good view of the area. Looting is also widespread at the ancient Mesopotamian city of Mari, which was founded in the early 3rd millennium B.C. and prospered as a node on the trade routes. Like Dura-Europos, Mari is located in the Deir ez-Zor province that has seen violent clashes during the conflict. The Albu Kamal region, where Mari is located, came under the control of the Islamic State in June. The looting in Mari appears to have ramped up over the last year, according to the report. The researchers identified 165 visible pits dug between August 2011 and March 2014, representing an average of 0.17 pits formed per day. Between late March and mid-November, however, they identified 1,286 new pits, an average rate of 5.5 pits dug every day over the seven-month period. The fourth site examined is Raqqa, an important city center that exemplifies the transition of a Greek/Byzantine urban center into an Islamic city by 796 A.D. Raqqa has been under the control of the Islamic State since October 2013 and was declared the group's capital earlier this year when they declared themselves a caliphate. The observed damage in vicinity of the Tentative World Heritage site in Raqqa, however, appears to be different from that of the other sites in the analysis, with little evidence of direct military conflict. "Rather, when damage is present, it appears to be nearly total and targeted, with specific buildings disappearing while the surrounding buildings remain untouched," the report stated. The association said the phenomenon appears too precise to have been caused by Syrian government forces and expressed doubts that the damage may be the result of U.S.-led airstrikes. "The more plausible explanation is that the demolitions in the vicinity of the Tentative World Heritage site's boundaries are the result of actions by ISIS," the report said. The two other areas that the researchers analyzed - the historic waterwheels of Hama, which raised water up to aqueducts for drinking and irrigation, and the ancient site of Ugarit, a mostly stone city that connected the ancient empires of Mesopotamia with those of the Mediterranean - do not appear to have been damaged, according to the satellite images.

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